

Reshaping the Canon. Vernacular photographs in European photography museums

“How can photography be restored to its own history? And how can we ensure this history will be both materially grounded and conceptually expansive, just like the medium itself?” Geoffrey Batchen asked in his essay on vernacular photography. 25 years later, I am posing the question: How (vernacular) photography is being restored to its own history by the public museums devoted to the medium of photography?

Researchers have always defined vernacular photography to some extent arbitrarily using such categories such as utility or function, everydayness and ubiquity, domesticity, locality and indigenoussness, non-artistry – often in positive notion, as a category that forces art to redefine itself keeping it from becoming ossified. By analyzing professional discourses surrounding vernacular photography, I will strive to capture the axes along which the division between vernacular and non-vernacular photography was constructed. This division directly influenced the valuation of vernacular photography, particularly as a museum object. I plan to explore changing discourses around vernacular photography and its presence in museum collections, focusing on how it was defined, problematized, and valued by researchers and museum professionals, and on what broader socio-cultural phenomena spurred those changes.

The long-standing uncertain status of photography as an art form, along with photographers' efforts to gain recognition for the artistic value of their work, has resulted in the domination of discussions about photography by aesthetic and formal categories. While the value of vernacular photographs as museum objects is rarely questioned anymore, their ambiguity makes them particularly dependent on the context and the language used to describe them. Conducting research in photography museums, where vernacular photographs can be problematized not only as documents, personal mementos, or “folk art”, but also as an essential part of the photographic history encompassing global and local socio-cultural practices, technology, industry, and more, gives the opportunity to find new languages for their descriptions and new interpretations. This research intends to shed light on the broader significance of photography museums within the museum landscape as potential mediators between art and everyday practices. Furthermore, they bridge the gap between the inaccessibility of traditional museum objects and the proximity and omnipresence of grassroots-produced photography, highlighting their relevance in contemporary society.

Research combines interdisciplinary tools developed in humanities and social studies, such as discourse analysis, ethnography of organization, museum/exhibition as research approach, and interpretative methods developed in visual and cultural studies as well as within the interdisciplinary field of critical museum studies. Combined, the two parts of research - discourse analysis and fieldwork in three selected European photography museums - account for exposing global and local processes of creating, valuing, and reinterpreting photographic collection and shaping the intrinsic value of vernacular photography as a vital element of photographic heritage.